



HEALTH CRISIS



de H. C. Andrei

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By H.C. Andrei

XANTAR

Synopsis:

This is a story from Xantar, the huge asteroid that became home for a few millions refugees after their own world was destroyed in a long conflict with another race. It was a gift from the Old Ones, a former home to them a few tens of thousands years before. Now it was a last chance for the remains of a race on the brink of extinction.

The Old Ones knew that the winners will still hunt the refugees and used their powers to send them to another galaxy.

Now, the xantarians, as the refugees took a new name, must fight for survival in a new galaxy full of promises but also full of dangers. And not only the galaxy, their home still contains things, forgotten by the Old Ones as mere toys but that are dangerous to the new occupants.

“Health Crisis” is set three years after the arrival in the new galaxy, in a moment when Xantar must face the exhaustion of pnium – the composite material making antimatter power possible and FTL movement of Xantar – and raiders attacks from different races.

I

"Are you sure the data is real?"

"Yes sir, I checked with our sources. But we have limited assets in the area." responded the young ensign.

"Very well, return to your work station. And signal the intervention squad. Maybe, just maybe, will need their services soon."

"Of course sir." the xantarian ensign left the office of the Head of Xantar Intelligence

Left alone, Colonel Katu keyed a code into his comm unit. The line was scramble and encrypted, the code use a specific channel and a series of public comm. units as relays.

The screen came to life, only static. But a voice came over the unit.

"Strange hour for a call, old friend."

"Yes, but I needed to speak to you urgently. I have a set of data that requires verification. It's a matter of some importance." he used a tone signaling the need for secrecy.

"I'll look at the data and call you as soon as I have news, old friend." said the scramble voice on the other end

Col. Katu ended the transmission with a light touch on the console. And settle back in his chair. There were a lot of problems, every day problems of the Service, but his subordinates could handle them. The problem pose by the new data, there was more danger in it than most small interstellar wars.

For the moment he couldn't do anything about it. Just wait for an answer from his old friend.

A single beep signaled the comm. unit opening. The same scramble screen. And the same altered voice by electronic means:

"Meet me at Dana's in one time unit (t.u.). The data. Is real."

For a few moments Katu remained with an empty look on his face. He was seeing another world. A world in which he saved hundreds of xantarians from an infected ship, with hundreds of infected coming at them. A memory of times when he was forced to order the destruction of several shuttles filled with people because he didn't know which were infected. He saw a mother pushing a child in a cargo pod then attacking a creature to buy time for the cargo pod to be lifted from the docking bay.

He swore a long time ago that it wouldn't happen again. Not on his watch.

Moving like a tired man he left the office, leaving his subordinates to handle the everyday problems of the Service. His was a bigger issue. A personal one.

Dana was a small bar at the base of one of the bigger spires in New Home. Small but quiet. Owned by a former member of the Service, it was a place where people could discuss private problems without the fear of being overheard.

The private, unmarked capsule left him near the entrance. Once he typed a password on the wall terminal two parts of the armored door retracted, letting him to enter.

Once inside, scanner rays played over him, seeking hidden weapons. He knew that if weapons were found, fire would be pouring from the guards and small autodefense guns. And, in contradiction with the laws, here guards had heavy weapons, single shot high-powered rifles, laser burners and shotguns that could fire coated rounds. Those rounds were used for crowd killing. In the enclosed environment of the bar were deadly.

He passed the scanners and found his favorite cubicle. Once he got in touch a button on the table centre. Activating iso-fields. Fields that isolated him from the rest of the bar. Someone wanting to enter had to receive permission or know the code for that exact cubicle. The field was opaque to noise and sensors so people could talk in peace.

A massive form passed right through the field and took a seat opposite the Colonel.

Katu didn't need to see to know who it was:

"Sit down old friend. We have a lot to talk."

The Ferr's head moved like he was approving:

"Where you got the data? From what I've got, the place is well guarded, almost a fortress."

"So you did check it out?"

"Of course. A cloaked shuttle made a pass above and scanned the facilities. It was real lucky that we weren't detected, they have a lot of sensors and orbital tracking devices. We dropped an agent among them, he manage to take some data. Data that confirmed the one you sent me."

"You moved fast old friend."

"What can I say, we are good. And the threat, well, it made my superiors worry. You didn't answer my first question. How did you get the raw data?"

"From a doctor working inside. A xantarian feeling remorse he sent us a small burst transmission. With encrypted data. Our operator saw the importance and got a priority message to me."

"Now what do we do?" the ferr move a small holoplate showing the planet where their problem was located.

"I have to speak to the Security Committee. They have to know what's happening..."

"No. I'm sorry Colonel but the situation is more desperately that you think. Our agents on the planet found out about a transaction taking place in the next days. They're selling. We can't let it spread again. We must move quickly."

"I must admit, my people can be slow in a crisis, the politicians mostly. But I have to speak to my friend in the Fleet, he has the resources, the ships. We run a series of scenarios, the best chances are with a powerful fleet bombardment followed by a small team insertion in the facilities to make sure everything is destroyed. The data, the samples, and kill all the scientists working on the virus." Katu was shaking his head.

The ferr smiled: "Our sims showed the same. The planet in question is in our sphere of influence. But we have no direct control over it. It's a complicated situation."

"That is why I called, your people control the space around the target."

"You'll have my support. Here are the coordinates for the rendezvous. My fleet will be there, waiting for you. If you don't make it, we will go alone. The Best will not rise again!" said the ferr with a cold voice and left.

"There is no time for discussions and comities, we must act fast." Katu was beginning to lose patience.

"I understand the fear, but this is a health crisis, a virus that can be cured in a few days. And it is not one of our planets, we have no planets, no home. Our home was destroyed. In another galaxy. We escape on a god's whim. The races here want to destroy us, so why should we care about them." said the tall xantarian at the head of the table.

He was one of the three persons listening to Colonel Katu as he explained his concerns and plan on how to attack the facility containing one of the most fearsome things ever to see life.

"You must understand that this is our own fault, our problem, because we open the vault that contained the virus. We must see to end it." The Colonel use an ice tone.

"It is clear we bear a part of blame. We must act to correct our mistake as we corrected before by destroying the original virus strain. That is why I allocated a part from the Reserve fleet to Colonel Katu command" the spokesmen, general Varak, commanded the Defense Fleet

The Councilmen tapped the table:

"What do the president has to say about this?"

"He left me to decide. It is a military problem." Varak was calm

"But with diplomatic implications."

"My orders stand. Colonel Katu, you have your orders. Carry them and finish this threat once and for all."

"Yes sir." the Colonel saluted and left the meeting

Sending orders from his comm. As he move trough the building he could see on a small screen as the orders were carry out. Ships were moving into positions. Sadi-rays, small fast transports, even a light carrier with a full complement of bombers and interceptors. Three ataka, each with a different configuration of weapons for different types of strikes. And a fully armed space to ground heavy dropship.

From now, his was a waiting job, the command in the field was in the hands of Commander Cortan. A capable commander, he was chosen because his experience with alien species.

And his command of fast attack runs against pirates.

The Colonel arrived in his office, ten small screens showing all reports from the target area.

"We've arrived at the rendezvous point commander." the Tactical Officer was watching the 3D display showing the positions of all ships and the position of the entire fleet on the system's plane.

Cortan was using an old formation. A globe of escorts around the light carrier and the dropship.

"Time?"

"Another hour to the deadline." answered T.O.

"Now we wait. And T.O., I want all ships at maximum alertness. Scan the area with all your sensors. In the war the Ferr used to put one on us by cloaking their ships until they were close so they could use beam weapons. While they can't mask a hyperspace exit, they can sneak pretty well."

"Yes sir"

As time passed the fleet's sensors scoured space looking.

And aboard ataka "Swift", an ensign found an anomaly. Like space itself was wavering. He passed it for a sensor glitch, until he saw it moving. He alerted his captain and then Fleet Command. Immediately, from a sadi-ray a stronger scan began. And once active sensors blanketed the area several anomalies appeared.

And then the ferr decloaked. Ships appearing in a loose circle around the xantarians.

"Annoying." Was the only thing Cortan had to say.

"We have a comm signal from the ferr flagship." T.O. was behind the commander watching a handheld screen.

Commander Cortan didn't answer. He studied the newcomers. Ferr ships had elongated fins and wings with central engines. Only one was like a brick. He knew that type. A planetary bombardment ship. The rest were ships like his own sadi-rays but he was sure they were outfitted with different types of weapons. The ferr used a modular system with a base model and lots of variants. It made them hard to differ in battle.

“Commander, the ferr are repeting the signal. They want to talk to you.”

“Open a channel. We should talk to them if we are to work together.” mumble Cortan

On the screen was Ro-Sha, from Ferr Intelligence Command, the friend of Colonel Katu. As it was Ferr space, the command of the combined fleets was to be given to them. As a gesture of courtesy Ro-Sha came aboard the light carrier to discuss operational details.

And soon after a flight of shuttles left the ferr ships and docked with the carrier.

Sergeant Willers stood on the deck looking at ferr soldiers leaving the assault shuttles:

“So, we are working with ferrs now?”

“Yes we are, sergeant.” replied the captain looking around the hangar as troops and equipment were unloaded

His assault troops company was hastily put aboard the dropship and he wasn’t happy with the arrangement. There were crates full of supplies spread throughout the ship, especially ammunition and heavy support weapons. He lost an entire crate of plasma cannons. How in the Hells could someone lose an entire crate. And now the ferr brought their own problems.

“I heard ferr groundlings are easy to beat” boasted someone from his own infantry

He looked for the soldier who dare to speak like that to an ally. And found him, a recruit from last batch to come aboard. In any normal army he was supposed to go to light work, police duty, not to be attached to an assault company. But the xantarians were in dire need, the number of soldiers they could field was so small that some companies were actually platoons.

He wanted to reprimand the “expert” but Willers was already on the roll.

“Hey you, bigmouth. Tell me, did you ever fight against the ferr? Or did you ever fought in a real battle?”

“I...” began the recruit

“I fought with them and against them. They are good soldiers, stealth and precision are their hallmark. Not brute strength. But that doesn’t mean they aren’t good fighters. I’ve seen

squads of ferrs killing entire enemy companies. Just because they had better tactics.” said Willers cutting the recruit short.

Another voice rise from soldiers crowded around them:

“Than why did the ferr were beatn by the Regime?”

The captain cut in:

“As a race the ferr were not pacifists, but their wars were mainly economic and informational. Not military. First contact was a shock, the other race being a militaristic regime that though others to be good only as slaves. A long struggle follow, the ferr fighting for survival. Using infiltration, stealth, covert operations, they manage to destroy the enemies strongholds with atomics. When the dust settled the ferr emerged victorious but at a heavy price. Such a price that when, encountering the Regime, they just went into defensive. And kept the Regime at bay for centuries. So just keep your mouths shut. Now get to training drills!”

Being reprimanded the soldiers turned back to their duties: weapons needed maintenance, power armors had to be check before battle, electronic systems tested one last time.

Willers followed his captain to meet with their ferr counterparts. As a joint operation, details were very important. Friendly fire was a high possibility even with IFF systems and intersys.

II

Perta planetary system was a quiet system. Colonized by ferrs a long time ago, by a generation ship, the planet became a hub for commerce for several insystem agro planetoids. Refugees, running from the Regime bolstered the population numbers. While officially Perta II was part of Ferr Conglomerate, the Cartels own most of it and maintained a small force for own police duties.

Conglomerate forces were based around the biggest astroport, a few suborbital armed shuttles, two wings of fighters and a wing of bombers. There were also a few police vessels. The space force was composed from old ships, ready to be retired, mostly system defense ships and a space domination ship (SDS).

The sparse defense grid was considered a joke by smugglers and independent traders, a few obsolete satellites and a space station transformed from an old huge transport vessel.

The planetary governor, still half asleep, stumbled in the huge chamber, planetary C&C, in time to see a major fleet entering orbit. Codes flashing on all the screens paralyzed the defense grid and blocked most communication networks on the planet.

"Who dare to came announce?" bellow at his subalterns "Raise the commanders in orbit. The Fleet will go immediately to maximum alert status."

The governor was named in his post because he had connections high up in the Conglomerate. He used the position to build a little nest on the side from bribes gathered by his own private little army of mercenaries. While not a competent administrator, was a shrew politician and felt a little shaken that his usually contacts in the administration didn't inform him about the fleet deploying in orbit.

"We have a link." Reported a comm. officer

"Put me trough."

On the main viewscreen an image clear itself, showing a simple ferr bridge. Two things drew his attention. First, an alien was present, xantarian, if he remembered correctly. And second, the highest rank didn't belong to Fleet personal, it belong to an Intelligence Office member. Seeing them, any ferr belonging to the Conglomerate felt a shiver, they were

recognized in the entire sector for their deceptive and deadly ways. And for the simple fact that they reported only to the Five.

"It's a real pleasure to see you governor. My name is Ro-Sha and I am in command of this fleet and from this moment of all military assets you have at your disposal. Please see to the logistic problems."

"Nobody inform me about a change of command" said the governor keeping his fury at bay, he was still a governor of an entire world

"I'm informing you now, governor. Stand by for orders confirmation. It should be coming right now. With the necessary clearance and authorization. Afterwards please set up a quarantine zone around planetary sector 14 and 21. Quietly. Reinforce the quarantine zone with heavy weapons and hoverships."

The governor had no intention to be pushed around so easily, until one of his adjutants pointed out the codes flashing on all the screens.

"Sir, the code gives them absolute authority over all forces. Orders coming from the Five."

Immediately the entire manner of the governor changed:

"I think that in the interest of cooperation and friendship I will help you in any way I can."

"I sure you will, your Excellency." The irony in the voice of Ro-Sha was unmistakable

After the screen went dark, Ro-Sha looked at his xantarian friend:

"Let's go to work. We have a lot to do." his words made the bridge to become an anthill

The bombardment ship moved into orbital position and for the first time the xantarians saw the big ship in action. Two rows of large weapons exited through portholes. One row was made up from heavy gauss cannons, the second row was composed by plasma bomb launchers. The setting was strange, until the middle, the gauss cannons were above, afterwards the plasma bomb racks were above. Changing in fact position.

For just a moment it was as if time was slowed. Then a firestorm exploded from its flank. Gauss projectiles were openers, burning paths through the atmosphere. Then the plasma bombs came, their power at full, thanks to the paths cleared by the gauss weapons.

The first on the ground to see the flood was a maintenance worker, he was following patterns in flying of birds, he caught a flash in the corner of the eye. His attention was captivated by such a large meteor. It was unusually for a civilized world to let large meteors trough orbital defense nets. Terror grew in him as he realized what the fire trail was. And that it was coming right at him. With a scream he began running to an entrance to the underground structures.

He never made it the shockwave from the first bomb ripped him to pieces.

He wasn't the only one that reacted slowly, those at the deflectors fields controls were also taken by surprise, the first bombs passed unhampered and exploded with fury, destroying vehicles, storage depots and other smaller buildings. But the next salvos exploded against deflector fields.

And were neutralized.

"Do you think that our governor friend will really help us?" the question came from Daktu, the xantarian liaison aboard the ferr command ship

"He doesn't have a choice, I am sure he'll keep an eye on us. In any case he'll try to gain some merit from the whole situation. We have agents watching him." Ro-Sha was preoccupied with reports from the bombing.

The deflector fields around the facility managed to stop a lot of incoming fire, only an insignificant amount was penetrating them. But the bombardment kept up and eventually the fields will collapse.

"Commander, we have heavy ships coming out from behind the planet. Regime configuration, all of them" reported T.O.

"Escort ships, form a screen and intercept them." he looked at Daktu "Do you think we are ready to begin our ground attack?"

Daktu was looking at the bombing results as well, studying them to see if assault shuttles could pass.

"Yes, deflector fields are weaker and our shuttles will be able to pass trough with minimum problems. Their escorts will pound the shields on the way down. Weaken them still."

The ferr moved his hand:

"Lunch!"

From the large belly of "Light Flight", a wing of nimble fighters was lunched. Follow closely by assault shuttles, and another wing of Blades. Bombers were lunched from ferr ships, supported by their own kind of fighters. Ferr fighters were poor skirmishers, they were slow moving and their jamming packs couldn't replace a good cannon.

"First wave is out commander, two ferr shuttles in cloaked mode are sneaking after them."

"Give me a view on the enemy ships. And show me their profiles." ordered Ro-Sha

Data and information fill the tactical display. The enemy force was more consistent than they thought. Made by many modified ships it presented a real challenge. In front, two assault ships with heavier guns in the prow, after them came a strange, chubby, ship with external racks from where fighters were lunching. Another ship, bigger than a radi-ray, with what looked like ion cannons took the northern path.

"How, in the name of all the Gods, did they gather such a large force? Those are capital ships." the question came on the lips of captain Tycho aboard "Sariita", a radi-ray who commanded the screen for the big ships.

"It seems that our cartel has a lot more resources that we've been led to believe." his ferr counterpart, showing itself as a holo figure on his bridge was smiling

"Well, will splatter them anyway." Tycho was sure of himself and his ships.

"Better be cautious, we don't know what capabilities have those ships. For all we know they could be hiding a hundred railguns each.

"Lunch bombers! Will see what they have." Tycho took a pointer and set a course for two attack ships, to outflank the enemy fleet

And battle was joined from both sides. With missiles and bullets flying all around.

The mercenary ships proved to be tougher than anticipated and let loose with a multitude of medium and small caliber autoguns, spraying space in an effort to kill the bombers.

Meantime, down on the planet

"Alpha squad and Assault I, you are inside the shield. Proceed with the mission. We will cover you." Alpha leader knew that the base did have a secondary shield system, a zapping field that could destroy all electrical instruments. For now both fields were down, but could

came up in any second, trapping the ground forces inside. So it was important that the assault troops destroy the generators.

Then a fire lance ripped the sky destroying a fighter. Another one fell to autoguns firing high explosive rounds.

"Need help here." voice his concerns Alpha IV trying to get outside the AA fire ring.

Towers sprouted from the ground, each one with a double turret. That could fire at ground or air targets.

"What the..." was all the pilot of the second ferr shuttle manage to say before he was blown out of the sky by a heavy gauss machinegun from the towers.

As the first assault shuttle touch the ground, troops swarmed outside, armed with heavy weapons. Rocket launchers, portables cannons and gauss machineguns. They were looking for an entrance in the underground. Leaving the outside fortifications to the flayers.

But the flayers weren't doing very well. Airships were coming from everywhere, like bugs, each armed with light cannons and air to air missiles. And now the fighter wings were hard press, while airships weren't a match for fighters there were too many of them. Each one firing all it had.

In orbit:

A flock of armored shuttles and civilian transports showed on the bombardment ship sensors. Coming from behind the planet, on the other side of screening ships. And each one of them seemed armed with some kind of weaponry. A second later rockets flared from them. Spreading out to reach the combine xantar/ferr fleet.

But even without screen there were a few ferr ships and the two transports around the big ships. And all open fire with secondary weaponry. All around the ships a death zone formed. Anything small that entered got kill, smash or destroy.

But the rockets thrown by the cartel's forces weren't shipkillers, all of them exploded in clouds of disruption canisters, mini projectiles like a sphere with the capacity to disrupt sensors at close ranges, in effect forming a sensor-blackout zone.

Now the combine fleet was blind, at least on that side.

Or at least that was what the pirates must have in mind. The ferr were used to disruption tactics, and switched to data from orbital relays behind the cloud.

And saw a wing of heavy bombers, ugly squat little metal beasts with forward plasma bomb launchers, coming right at the drop ship. The easiest target for them because it's lack of shielding.

Immediately, two ferr ships move to close the gap and their rapid fire guns carpeted space. The tactic was one used every time against bombers, the little buzzards were armed with a big sting. If they got close enough.

But once a projectile from cannons hit you could get a target lock and use concentrated fire.

On the other side of the battlefield the fleet was gaining upper hand. Enemy ships were streaming atmosphere and power surges played over the hulls. An enemy ship exploded, an ataka getting a lucky shot at the engines.

"Tracker" was an old ataka ship, it was a ship that made the inter-galactic voyage inside Xantar. Now that reparations were finished she was in service again. Doing what she was built to do. Fighting.

On it's cramped bridge, a young captain was seeing the deflector fields coming back to life around the enemy's perimeter down. Something, like an anomaly the ferr used to hide ships, was climbing in orbit, coming out just before the field closed.

"Tanny, can you scan for atmospheric disturbances? Something got out from inside the field." asked his scan officer.

The light skin woman moved her fingers quickly on the touch-screen. "Nothing, there are too many traces from the fight. But I do get a faint trace of energy in the ionosphere. Leaving rapidly the gravity well."

A shudder rippled through the entire ship as a round detonated against the deflectors, reminding him that the battle was still on and an enemy ship had a lock on his own little ataka.

"Aft battery, fire on enemy target. Artillery, I'm counting on you to keep them busy. I want to check something."

And Sarven guided "Tracker" near orbital lanes. Looking for the energy pattern, the anomaly. While they met the ferr he scanned the energy signatures from cloaked ships. Now he was seeing a very similar signal. Perhaps it was an infiltrator ship, a ferr ship.

“Tracker” was hit again, this time small bullets from a secondary gun. It shook them but they kept on course. Sarven was asking, on a coded channel, instructions from Fleet Command. He wanted to know if the ferr knew about the anomaly and if they have a ship out there. An answer came soon.

No ferr ship was out there, and if the signature was a ship without a current ID code he was under order to destroy her at any cost. He knew why. It could be a ship trying to flee, with whatever they wanted aboard. He took personal control of the lance cannon and a smaller gauss-gun, both in the bow.

“Tanyy. Where is the signature?”

“It’s hard to see it. It should be coming in range right now. Transferring you the possible positions for targeting.”

Underground, the assault troops were advancing slowly, the heavy armor a blessing. Heavy armor was soaking the defenders fire, proximity mines explosions and gas attacks. Each of the soldiers own their life at least once to the crafter smiths. Ferr troops used sniper weapons at long distances, while the xantarians advance under cover from laser cannons that sent lances of tremendous power, frying everything in the small corridors.

Willers cursed all the Gods, he couldn’t use heavy bomb launchers because the walls themselves may crumble. And now the enemy was well fortified, firing a lot of high caliber bullets that could penetrate even his own armor. He needed an alternate route inside the main complex.

A door hissed just a little behind, and a massive form came out, a ferr infantrymen with heavy assault rifles in both hands. At his back other ferrs were moving trough another poor lighted corridor.

“It seems you have a problem. And we have a solution. Come with us. We’ve found another way.”

Willers wasn’t above accepting help.

“Let’s go.”

Here tunnels were larger and unprotected. The ferr scouts found the maintenance tunnels, used for hauling cargo. Using these tunnels they moved quickly, taking by surprise mercenary teams that thought the maintenance tunnels were closed.

"They hadn't blow the facility yet." The ferr was moving with care using small floating globe probes to scout ahead.

"Yes. So it must be that they are still here. With the virus." said Willers firing at a small autodefense emplacement.

"Our parties have scoured most of the facility and while we found laboratories we still did not find where the virus was produced."

"Annoying. Any word from the surface. Our comm. channels have gone dead a while ago. And we can't reestablish contact."

The ferr moved his head in a gesture learned from xantarians. "We also lost contact. My spotters near the surface tell me that deflector fields are up again and the air battle is raging."

A soldier found a tunnel, closed by heavy armored doors that seemed to go down. They followed it. Seeking answers.

III

“Tracker” moved like a shark seeking prey. It’s captain was sure now that it was a ship they were tracking. Especially, after one mercenary ship came after them. By doing it was weakening the forces involved in the fight so there must be a good reason to chase a small ataka.

And now a laser weapon raked the ataka. Travor just hoped it will hold. At least until he could get a lock on what was, undoubtedly, a cloaked ship. Trying to get away from the planet.

And the arm of ferr law.

His firing reticule was over his eye. As the auto system wasn’t locking on the signature, he was forced to manual firing. And hope that he was as good as he thought. The lance gun was charging. His target was moving rapidly.

Then his feeling came, and his finger tightened. A bright lance cut space like brilliant thunder.

And hit something.

A shadow in space. Under lance fire the cloaked field fell and the ship was exposed.

A small ship, a courier. Big engines and a small space for cargo. But as it was such a small ship, the lance burned through armor like it was jelly. And the bullet following it, exploded inside. The small courier exploded.

A cheer erupted on the bridge.

“Stop it. We still have a warship on our backs.” Sarven curbed their enthusiasm

New rounds burned through space, “Tracker” was hit, without shield it presented a perfect target. And soon air began to escape, holes were opening in the ship’s armor, uncovering essential systems.

Then a bullet smashed in, blowing up a good chunk from the ship. Blind luck made it to be the crew quarters, and was quickly sealed off. But “Tracker” was finished, main cables cut, no energy flowing into main power systems. Only emergency generators kept the crew alive.

The enemy ship close in for the killing blow.

When a heavy salvo smash the mercenary mid-ship.

Two ferr ships outflanked the main battle line and now where coming to help the wounded ataka.

Secondary missiles salvos pierced the enemy armor and force it to retreat.

Air combat at close quarters was messy, and soon devolved into a real furrball. Being inside deflector fields, aircraft movement was hampered. And AA fire was taking it's toll on the attackers.

"We need help." was hollering on all channels the leader of the air force. "Someone take down the fields and those AA emplacements. They are murdering us." His voice punctuated by explosions as a drop-shuttle blew up.

"Alpha I, you have one on your tail." Alpha II roll in the sky firing both his autocannons in the aircraft targeting Alpha I.

A missile hit Alpha II spreading it in all directions. A direct hit from an anti-air tower.

A ripple streaked in the sky, like a thunder coming from heavens, and impacted the deflectors. Follow by others. And plasma bombs rained from the skies. In a single flash deflectors collapsed, letting the bombardment hit disruption and anti-air towers.

And a voice filled all channels.

"We have your back landing party. We just had some problems up here, now we are back again. Second wing fighters are coming down right now to help you. Just give target coordinate and will pound them o dust." Ro-Sha sounded a little tired.

A chorus of voices responded and target information was relayed to the bombardment ship. Targets were given to the dropship and "Light Flight". While their firepower was considerable lighter they could still put out a curtain of fire in the atmosphere.

"Reestablish contact with our ground forces." commanded Ro-Sha keeping an eye on the space battle.

The conflict in space was almost over. The last Cartel ships were pulling out, limping away to free space, far enough to open a hyperspace jumppoint. All bombers and shuttles had been eliminated. And now the fast transports were closing any exit point from the planet, their light guns enough to stop shuttles.

The only bright thing was that the enterprising captain of the ataka found the runner ship and destroyed it. A very likely possibility was that the virus, or at least part of it, was on board.

Now if the groundlings could find the lab, the scientist, and any materials remaining.

Duvok had a smirk on his face "The governor contacted us and sent all the data on the Cartels involved in the company behind the lab. Your sources also contacted us and sent other three sites with large enough capacities to produce the virus."

"Send assault troops to each facility. If there is even a chance of lab work on the virus they are to back out and we'll bomb the place from orbit with atomics."

Inside the complex the soldiers were finally making progress.

The laboratory was found and every bit of data destroy, burned away or disintegrated. A scout reported seeing the head researcher, DouL-Harr, but lost its tracks inside the tunnel complex. They continued searching for him, if he was not found the entire raid would have been for nothing.

"Hey, friends. Is this what are you looking for?" asked the commander of the ferr groundlings. In one of his massive hands the rogue scientist was squirming like an animal.

"Where did you find him?" asked Willers still busy with the destruction of the lab.

"In a little hideout, inside the wall. Protected from sensors. One of our scouts stumbled upon him."

"Yeah. I though we scan the entire area."

"Very well, lets see what he knows, and then get out of here."

After a short interrogation they found out all they needed to know, the locations of the rest of datadisks containing information about the virus and the names of other scientist working on the project. The data was sent in orbit via coded laser transmission. There Ro-sha gave orders to clean up everything. With maximum force.

Willers and his assault troops placed small atomic bombs in certain points and retreated from the surface. In their wake the earth shook as bombs blew up forming minor earthquakes. Orbital bombardment cleared any other possible locations for Cartel members.

And ferr agents on the surface began the mop up job. Cleaning the mess.

After the head scientist was secure aboard "Light Flight", Duvok shook hands with Ro-Sha and left aboard his shuttle. It was time for the xantarians to leave. Before diplomatic problems arose. Damaged ships were dragged along by the two small transports. "Tracker" was towed by "Light Flight" as a sign of honor.

Sometime later, Ro-Sha looked at the xantarian fleet as it was entering hyperspace.

The mission was a success, the pirates have been scattered and power of the Cartels greatly reduced. The data on the nanovirus was a plus, it was beyond any science known to him. But in time who knew.

"Good job," he complimented the other being in the room.

"As you say commander," a shadow seemed to come out of the wall and moved closer. It wasn't ferra but something else, a wiry creature with a skin like a chameleon.

"They did not see you I trust?"

"No, nobody saw me. I captured Douk-Harr and I gave him to our infiltrator troops, then I sneaked aboard a shuttle. And that was all."

"You did very well. You will have a generous reward"

After his agent left, Ro-Sha switched on a screen and browsed through information about the Xantar Intelligence Service. In the last months they became quite good at their job, not at the same level with his own agents but better than most races. They were beginning to pose a problem for ferra operations. He needed to get a few moles inside the Service.

In his own office Colonel Katu was tracing a screen with his fingers. On it, data about the nanovirus was scrolling sent by the fleet before entering hyperspace. In itself the virus was a real work of art, capable of taking over any biological or technological entity. The surrogate that the Cartels was producing wasn't as good as the original but it was a dangerous virus nonetheless. Xantarian scientists assured him that now a cure could be found in at most a month. For this nanovirus.

For the original strain there was no defense. And that left a sour taste in his mouth.

He took out the armored datadisc out of its place. One crisis was averted.

But another ten were calling for the attention of the head of Xantar Intelligence Service.

*Also in the **XANTAR** series:*

XANTAR – Convoy into Unknown

XANTAR – Diplomat

XANTAR – The first year